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ABSTRACT

This document examines the function of social conventions among strangers. Conventions are regularities in behavior, sustained by an interest in coordination and an expectation of cooperation. Such regularities may arise temporarily or fall just as temporarily; they may exist in a particular time or place and may take time to evolve. From the existence of conventions comes the knowledge that due to the interdependence of people within a society, there is an intense interest in coordination among strangers. Without social organization there is no way to bring about such coordination. Moreover, conventions give a sense of communality to a culture in which individualism is a significant value. Individuals, however, may feel that personal efforts to solve social problems are minuscule or even futile. Leaders may recognize that conditional cooperation is ground enough for establishing a convention. For a new convention to arise, there has to be enough individuals to make that convention work. Sometimes people participate in social action because they do not realize the likelihood of failure. The experience may produce its own staying power. Progress affords encouragement to participants that success is possible and depends on cooperation. Even failure to produce new conventions may yield success stories. Not everyone may follow the path those who cooperate create, but their efforts may lead to solutions for social problems. (SG)

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Cooperation among Strangers

by

David W. Brown

". . . public life is — simply and centrally — our life among strangers . . ."

— Parker Palmer

An Occasional Paper of the Kettering Foundation

SO 022 905

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David W. Brown holds an A.B. from Princeton and a J.D. from Harvard. He taught at the Yale School of Management for 10 years, where he developed 30 teaching cases based on his government experience, including service as chairman of the New York State Commission of Investigation and deputy mayor of New York City. He has also authored several articles on modern forms of participation in public life. During 1991-1992, he was a visiting scholar at the Kettering Foundation after serving as president of Blackburn College.

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PREFACE

Is large-scale cooperation possible among strangers without market incentives or government coercion? There is a widely held assumption that in so large and diverse a society as America, the grounds for large-scale cooperation are essentially economic and legal, and that cooperation otherwise is only possible in small groups among people who know each other. But there is some urgency in asking the question because of the growing skepticism about market or government remedies alone as the answer to our substantial public problems.

The question has led me to examine how social conventions work. They offer evidence of everyday cooperation among strangers, which is often overlooked. We have a repertoire of conventions, neither market driven nor codified in law, that we take for granted in living together and governing ourselves. The convention model alone cannot solve public problems, but it does provide a framework for thinking about them and coordinating a response.

I am indebted to Charles Lindblom and Thomas Schelling for their conceptual work on social problem solving and strategic thinking. Their work corresponds with my experience in government and with what I learned from problem simulations that I conducted for ten years at Yale. Like scaffolding for what I have constructed here, my settled assumption is that problem solving in public life is more social than cognitive. We solve problems through experience with others. Our behavior should not be characterized as either self-serving or public-spirited; it is "contingent" and, to a great extent, depends on what others do. Social conventions as a model for problem solving navigates between those who assume that narrow self-interest rules public life and those who believe that "communitarian" values should. I don't think the possibility of cooperation among strangers can be dismissed any more than it can be invoked. It all depends, and that is why I chose to examine conventions.

My greatest debt is to David Mathews and my wife Alice, who, in their own ways, have so generously supported my work. This paper, in some respects, is speculative. It is a work-in-progress offered here for discussion at the Kettering Foundation and for comment from friends and colleagues.

David W. Brown
May 1992

WHAT ARE CONVENTIONS?

You and I participate in conventions every day. They ease our passage through the day's activities and make it possible for us to cooperate, even as strangers. Conventions organize and simplify the many instances of potential confusion or chaos; yet most of the time we are not particularly aware that they exist. Conventions are "regularities in behavior, sustained by an interest in coordination and an expectation that others will do their part." (Lewis 1969, p. 208)

I have chosen ordinary, even some trivial, examples of everyday conventions to explain how they work for us. Start with the convention of a line at a bank. A line forms when there are too many of us at one time for a bank teller to accommodate. I accept the convention of a line when I arrive at the bank and wait my turn. If I arrive at the bank before it opens, those of us waiting will note who was there first, second, and so on, and more than likely adjust accordingly when the doors are opened. There may be a few pushy ones who either don't know, or pretend they don't know, who was there first and rush to the head of the line, but there will be a line, not something else inside the bank.

When we talk about solving problems, what we usually mean is improving a situation. Coordinating a response to any given problem is not the same thing as solving the problem itself. When we form a line at the bank, we are not solving the problem of congestion. The line is a convention that helps us cope with the congestion. Our line at the bank produces an outcome that serves as a solution. It is not necessarily the best solution, but imagine my problem at the bank of convincing those in line that there are other ways to solve the problem of congestion. Those in line have become more attached to the convention as they wait. They are already heavily invested in the solution and will not be easily dissuaded.

Existing conventions often divert attention from the underlying problem that calls for coordination in the first place. While we're standing in line at the bank, some of us might urge a bank officer to hire more tellers or install more automatic teller machines to eliminate the congestion. Or, if no line had yet formed, we could decide among ourselves who had the better reason for going first, second, and so on.

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If you had a pressing appointment or I had a sick child waiting in the car, perhaps we could prevail on the others. But everyday coordination problems among strangers usually don't afford us the time to talk over such matters. We will probably settle on the line, not because it satisfies everyone (it certainly doesn't suit me with a sick child in the car), but because it generally satisfies almost everyone else under the circumstances. Some coordination is better than none. It improves the situation.

A convention is like a well-worn path that I choose to follow in the woods. I know that many hikers in the past have used it to get from point A to point B. If I do not know the woods and follow the path for the first time, I may not even know of the existence of point B. I assume, however, that the path will take me somewhere — to the other side of the woods or to a place worth visiting. What must have been in the mind of the person who had no path to follow? What accounted for the path that he started that others now follow? A convention is like that — we assume that it makes sense because other people have used it. Like the origin of a path, a convention may seem an arbitrary or random choice. There are, after all, a number of possible paths from point A to point B. Still we take the well-worn path because it offers advantages. We don't have to clear a way; we assume the path has some purpose; and well-worn paths, more often than not, get us where we want to go.

"Like the origin of a path, a convention may seem an arbitrary or random choice. There are, after all, a number of possible paths from point A to point B. Still we take the well-worn path because it offers advantages. We don't have to clear a way; we assume the path has some purpose; and well-worn paths, more often than not, get us where we want to go."

The convention of a line is strong and endures because it works for everyone . . . eventually. It solves a coordination problem and the solution depends on a regularity of behavior. The line only works for us if, time and again, almost everyone is willing to form or join lines. If anyone tries to avoid a line, those of us in it will think that person is "out of line." Such regularity implies that we tacitly agree on a precept that governs our behavior. In the case of a line, that precept of behavior that promotes coordination and sustains the convention would seem to be first come, first served. Such a precept is embedded in other conventions: rights of seniority in employee relations, waiting lists for public housing, air traffic control, allotting seats to opera season subscribers or spaces in overenrolled university courses. When demand exceeds supply, if only temporarily, a choice has to be made about how to coordinate the demand.

Conventions are established to solve the problem of uncertainty as to how we should coordinate our response to any number of problematic situations. For example, the convention of a "lost and found" department establishes a means of communication between strangers. Imagine that you found my eyeglasses on the bench in the lobby of an office building and were told by the guard that there was no "lost and found" where you could leave them and that he would not take custody or responsibility. Imagine my dismay when told the same thing by a different guard the next morning when I returned to look for my glasses, not knowing exactly where I misplaced them. What is the likelihood that I will ever meet you or discover the ledge you put them on before leaving the building? A "lost and found" is a convention for eliminating your uncertainty, and mine, about how to coordinate the actions of strangers. The same is true of bulletin boards, bus stops, receiving lines, declared holidays, store hours, annual meetings, self-help groups, bank clearinghouses, etc.

"A 'lost and found' is a convention for eliminating your uncertainty, and mine, about how to coordinate the actions of strangers. The same is true of bulletin boards, bus stops, receiving lines, declared holidays, store hours, annual meetings, self-help groups, bank clearinghouses, etc."

Coordination does not work if people are uncertain what to do in a given situation. To prepare for emergency routines, we rehearse simple exits and actions, sometimes with sirens, bells, or whistles, that coordinate what would otherwise be dangerous disorder. "Walk don't run" or "women and children first" are simple declarative statements that tell us how to exit and in what order. When we are uncertain about the value of used goods — collectibles, antiques, and art objects — we may collectively determine their value through the convention of an auction. When we are uncertain about what to wear, the invitation to a banquet will say "black tie," telling us what others will be wearing so we can conform our dress to theirs. Since it is impractical to bring different outfits to the banquet and then change on the scene, the invitation tells us what to do in advance.

If novice spectators are uncertain about how to behave at athletic events, they follow the crowd: absolute quiet when someone putts, take a seventh-inning stretch at a baseball game, offer water to a passing marathon runner, boo the referee in basketball, but hiss the linesman at a tennis match. And then there is the "wave," a new convention, in large, outdoor stadiums. Section after section of spectators rise and fall. With very little effort on anyone's part, a spectator just stands up and sits down in the exercise; the crowd creates a show for itself and for the TV audience. It is better

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than the old card sections at football games where participants could never see the product of their collaboration.

Like the "wave," one obvious characteristic of most conventions is the relative simplicity of the behavior to be coordinated. A convention, however, does not necessarily mean that everyone does the same thing. For example, a neighborhood potluck supper asks each person to bring a different dish. Without coordination (an organizer with a checklist of salads, casseroles, desserts) everyone might bring macaroni and cheese, which hardly covers the variety of fare that makes the occasion a success.

Coordinating the collection and distribution of perishable food to those without is like the convention of a potluck dinner writ large. Churches, workplaces, schools, and firehouses facilitate collection from members, employees, families, and neighborhoods. Donations also come from hotels, restaurants, grocery chains offering perishables to nonprofit "harvest" agencies that, in turn, distribute what has been donated and collected. Food pantries and soup kitchens depend on this individual and associational network. There is even a community garden in Houston, Texas, that stocks nine food pantries by producing more than 16,000 pounds of vegetables in both the spring and fall. (Earthworks Group 1991, p. 21) The convention of pooling private resources, whether it is food or something else, creates an abundance through coordination. We already do that with libraries, auctions, blood banks, community garage sales, museums, and thrift shops.

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Consider the pooling of manpower and division of labor when we organize a search party to find lost children, hikers, confused older persons, or those stranded in storms or at accident sites. The convention of a search party has each person in the party cover a different portion of the area in question so that no spot is overlooked. It is like the coordination used in local "blockwatches" where citizens take turns being the eyes and ears of their neighborhood. Another way of thinking about citizen groups protecting public space is to recall the practice of rounding up a posse. A posse was created because there was an emergency that required extra manpower, just as today we have volunteer fire and ambulance crews, auxiliary police, or citizen patrols to deter crimes.

The convention of deputizing citizens when government is shorthanded, or short of funds, has gained new life in other ways. There are highway signs now in 45 states, which tell us that local associations, school groups, and businesses have adopted pieces of the roadside and their members periodically clean up litter. "Adopt-a-Highway" is a new practice among citizen groups to combat the pollution of public space in those areas they share but for which no one had taken responsibility. The same concept is being used to coordinate the protection of streams and beaches. Citizen groups plant trees and shrubs to prevent bank erosion, and, in a nationwide beach cleanup, volunteer crews picked up two million pounds of debris in three hours. (Earthworks Group 1989, p. 45) Then there are those who organize local land trusts that buy up private holdings which would otherwise be developed. A staff person of the Nature Conservancy explains: "They see certain places they'd like to see protected, and realize that the federal and state system is not going to do it for them, and neither is the town, so they should do it for themselves." (*New York Times* 4/23/92, p. B-8)

A convention is not the same thing as a habit. Smoking is a habit. Not smoking in public is a convention. Standing up and sitting down may be a habit. Doing it together in order to create a "wave" at Dodger Stadium is a convention. The banquet invitation, alerting us to how others will dress, is a convention. Wearing a tuxedo to a banquet is merely following fashion.

"A convention is not the same thing as a habit. Smoking is a habit. Not smoking in public is a convention."

A convention is not the same thing as a norm. A norm is a model of correct behavior and more than likely an end in itself. Something is simply done or not done for its own sake. Like a habit, a norm may have no evident consequences for others. Jon Elster provides an unappealing but graphic example of a norm. "I don't pick my nose when I can be observed by people on a train passing by, even if I am confident that they are all perfect strangers whom I shall never see again and who have no power to impose sanctions on me." (Elster 1989, p. 119) With a convention, we are usually focused on the satisfactory outcome that our cooperation can produce, not the behavior itself. We participate in mass demonstrations, offer directions to someone who is lost, return items to a "lost and found," or look after someone's luggage while they do an errand.

As a convention, however, becomes established, a norm will, in all likelihood, emerge to support a particular regularity of behavior. The convention of a line is enforced by those in it against anyone whose behavior is "out of line." Consequently, the distinction between a norm and a convention becomes blurred. One year, I asked my wife whether she would join me in refusing to go on daylight savings time. I didn't like the sudden change. I also wanted to continue my daily walks at sunset and daylight time left the sun too high in the sky. I suggested that we go for another month on standard time. But Alice would have none of it. She was adamant. I asked why. "I feel like I belong more," she said. "I like to be in step with the rest of the world." The convention of a time change to get more daylight meant less to Alice than making sure that she was not considered an eccentric by friends or strangers.

"Further analysis of conventions may help us discover new responses to the challenge of organizing and involving disparate groups of people in public life."

Through tacit understandings between individuals, conventions encourage spontaneous cooperation and coordination among strangers. Further analysis of conventions may help us discover new responses to the challenge of organizing and involving disparate groups of people in public life.

THE VAGARIES OF CONVENTIONS

The convention of a line works if enough others cooperate. A temporary convention can arise spontaneously in the same way. Imagine joining a group of pedestrians trying to cross a busy intersection. As pedestrians, there is communication among us, although unspoken. We watch each other, waiting for a leader or perhaps being the leader ourselves, willing to venture into the intersection with enough followers, to stop the oncoming traffic and for a moment shift the advantage to ourselves — or rather to enough other pedestrians, so that we can pass safely to the other side. (Schelling 1978, pp. 92-93) Our coordination is fleeting and we will probably never see each other again, although at the next busy intersection, you or I may seek to organize a solution among another group of strangers in which it is in everyone's interest to cross together. Leadership of fellow pedestrians off the curb is timely but of only passing significance. If enough others follow, those who led the excursion are no longer needed.

Sometimes, of course, the attempt to establish a temporary convention fails. Not enough of us venture out together and whoever miscalculates the others' willingness to follow has to fall back to the curb and wait for a break in the traffic, a new temporary leader, or a new effort of strangers massing to cross. There is no precept of behavior for crossing the street as there is for the line at the bank, except that if enough of us cross, we will get our way. We might even defy the established convention of a stoplight if we succeed in crossing on the red. A temporary convention is established simply because there are enough people who make it so, whether it is crossing streets or not crossing a picket line, producing a standing ovation at the opera house, or looting a store during civil unrest.

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Sometimes the convention of a line may be overthrown, if only temporarily. A teller will open his window and say, "I can help someone over here," and people behind me rush over ahead. And in situations when we are isolated from each other, I've noticed that drivers regularly try to butt into a slow-moving line of cars where two lanes merge into one in the case of highway construction. All I can do is honk my horn or glare. If most of us cooperate by staying in line when traffic is stalled, the line crasher has an advantage. If, however, too many combative drivers converge, they defeat themselves. It is much the same when preparing to board an airplane. The airline employee tries to regulate entry onto the plane by dividing the passengers into categories: first, those with small children, the elderly, and first class; then those with coach seats in the rear of the plane, and so on. The coordination can break down when some passengers, like me, anticipate a shortage of space for their luggage in the overhead racks on the plane and try to pass through the gate out of turn. If the employee doesn't turn us away, enough others sense the overthrow of the convention and the boarding becomes a mess.

If events put the underlying reason for a particular coordination solution in doubt, then a convention can change, because our interest in coordination disappears. For example, Americans accepted the 55-mph speed limit when we experienced an energy shortage in the 1970s. The crisis made us more conservation-minded and with the help of law enforcement, the new convention worked because we saw a reason for it. As the energy crisis dissipated, so, too, did the 55-mph

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speed limit. With or without law enforcement, speeds picked up.

You may not think of a speed limit as a convention since the law would seem to have preempted our choice of how fast to drive. But whatever speed the great majority of drivers establish is the conventional speed limit. Of course, that conventional limit is influenced by visible law enforcement, just as law enforcement is influenced by the speed that most drivers consider suitable for any particular stretch of highway. We watch what others are doing and adjust our speed, to keep up and stay within the pack. Police call this "caravaning." Just like crossing the street, there is safety in numbers.

How does the conventional speed get established on a stretch of highway? There is leadership on the highway, but unlike the person who first ventures into a busy intersection, it is hard to know on the highway whether we are leading or following. Nobody is in charge but somehow one or more drivers' speed influences the speed of other drivers. It certainly doesn't mean that everyone prefers that speed. Conventions are established because we seek to coordinate our behavior with others, and one or more of us driving 65-mph, instead of 55-mph, set the speed temporarily for everyone else. Conventions coerce outcomes and though we may be satisfied with many of the outcomes, the success of conventions depends on whether enough of us go along with the outcome, not whether each of us prefers that particular outcome. Some drivers, of course, go their own way at their own speed even though that speed is too slow or too fast compared to what the majority of drivers are doing.

A strong convention exists when everyone prefers the same outcome and there seem to be no plausible alternatives. Where there are a number of alternatives to a coordination problem, however, a fragile convention may be said to exist. The solution of a line is not very appealing but once established, I have no alternative at the bank. But jury duty is a fragile convention because there are a variety of reasons that you and I can give in order to be excused. When we have alternatives, the same is true of elections, litter barrels, collection plates, and blood drives. Fragile conventions stand a better chance when there are norms that support them. Norms focus on correct behavior — voting, not

littering, tithing — not specific outcomes. When we use norms in support of fragile conventions, we may be acknowledging that coordination alone is not a good enough reason, by itself, to make some conventions work.

"When we use norms in support of fragile conventions, we may be acknowledging that coordination alone is not a good enough reason, by itself, to make some conventions work."

Some conventions make sense in one place but not another. Consider the roadside farm stand where fruits, vegetables, and flowers are sold. An unattended cigar box is the depository for purchases and making change. The exchange is made without the seller being present, trusting the purchaser will leave the proper amount and take no more change than he is entitled to. The convention works well in a place where there is a modicum of trust among strangers. It would not work in the downtown of a large city where such trust does not exist. There, you might find newspaper vending machines that don't make change. They do offer the opportunity of taking more papers than you have paid for. But, except for those who occasionally set up their own temporary business of selling such purloined newspapers, the normal purchaser has no need for ten morning newspapers and, like the farm stand customer, knows that the convention will not last long if he takes unfair advantage. The farm stand and the vending machine both work, by and large, in their respective settings.

Other conventions are used at one time but not another. Suppose there are four of us who are going out to dinner, but we can't agree on where to eat. We have several conventions to choose from in solving our coordination problem. After discussing possible restaurants, we might take a vote to determine where to go. Or, if it came down to two choices, we might flip a coin or let a passerby settle the matter for us. Another way to resolve the matter is to delegate the choice to one of our party saying that this time Sarah can choose. (Lindblom and Cohen 1979, p. 23) Or suppose one of our foursome says he won't go with us unless we choose his favorite Chinese restaurant. By his preemptive behavior, we may agree to do as he wishes so we won't spoil the evening. We can coordinate an acceptable outcome by any of these procedural conventions — voting, chance, arbitration, delegation, or bargaining. There is usually more than one way to solve a coordination problem. Some other foursome might prefer using the same procedural convention every time they go out — "we always let the majority rule." Our group's convention of letting Sarah decide is only a temporary

expedient. We delegate choice, however, in a variety of situations other than how to settle on a place to eat. It is a strong convention, not because everyone always uses it, but because when it is used, it works. It settles, for the time being, a problem of coordination.

Many conventions take some time to evolve and become established. As a former smoker, I can trace the gradual impact of enough others' disapproval of my smoking habit for me to eventually give it up. My children chastised me at home after being educated at school about its pernicious effects. My students accosted me in my office. Restaurants segregated me and airlines denied me the pleasure. As the decade wore on, there were very few places where the "no-smoking" convention was not in place. Although local government in many jurisdictions responded to the vocal majority of nonsmokers and threatened me with fines, it was the private policing of my children, students, and the ever-offended strangers whom I encountered that made the difference. It is as though I had broken into their line and they were unforgiving. Finally, the continued unpleasantness of their social disapprobation made me fall in line. Now that I no longer smoke, I want others to do the same. When you yield to a convention, you invest in its being a success. Nothing offends me more these days than someone who puffs away, reminding me of my old pleasure or giving me cause to worry about their passive smoke as detrimental to my health. After all, one reason I gave up smoking was being persuaded by enough others that I was endangering their health.

A similar evolution, prompted by the precept of conservation, has established recycling as a convention thereby changing consumer behavior because of the increasing problem of household waste. On a trip to the supermarket, you and I may bring our own shopping basket rather than using the paper or plastic at the store. We now look for cardboard, not Styrofoam, egg cartons. We may have started to buy in bulk and, therefore, use less packaging. We want "recyclable packaging." We buy beverages in glass or aluminum containers that can be recycled. The inside flap of my raisin bran cereal box tells me we could save over 500,000 trees each week, if we recycled our Sunday newspapers.

Some people just don't want to regulate their behavior in accordance with an evolving convention, even if their self-interest is served. Seat belts or a "no-smoking" sign provoke a libertarian streak that runs deep. Others will point out that some people bear a disproportionate burden in regulating their behavior, just as when you have a pressing appointment, or I have a sick child waiting in the car, and we prefer not to wait in line at the bank. There isn't much we can do about the line; the convention is well established. But when it is not, our legitimate reasons for not wanting to cooperate may undo others' willingness to cooperate. If you have a garden, water-conservation measures fall more heavily on you than on someone who lives in an apartment with one window plant. If you are single and hold down two jobs, you may not see why you should find time to clean up outdoor spaces that I frequently use with my four children.

"There are any number of disparities in circumstance and condition, which people may use to justify their reluctance to cooperate and so develop a new convention."

There are any number of disparities in circumstance and condition, which people may use to justify their reluctance to cooperate and so develop a new convention. A recent example is carpooling to reduce traffic congestion and curb pollution. Carpooling is a practice organized by employers and municipalities in suburban corridors to get more people to share their cars with others going the same way to and from work. It can be difficult — coordinating pickups, driving with strangers, sharing costs, or managing the disruptions when people move or change jobs. People have also wanted to maintain flexibility in their commuting schedules, to listen to their favorite radio programs, or to smoke. Like the pedestrians who retreat to the curb, if enough others don't carpool, the coordination problem has not been solved. With little to show for the effort, carpooling has declined from 33 percent in 1980 to 22 percent in 1990, a year when Americans spent two billion hours stuck in traffic jams and used three billion gallons of gasoline doing it.

The practice of staggered work hours to relieve rush-hour congestion has not succeeded. Employers and their employees often have conflicting interests over who works 7 a.m. - 3 p.m., 8 a.m. - 4 p.m., etc., or truck delivery schedules can't be changed, or children's school hours interfere, or some people don't like to drive in the dark, and so on. Even when commuters want the same outcome — less congestion — there has been no obvious regularity of behavior that they can agree on or coordinate. Like couples at a square dance

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without a caller, they know the patterns but they can't seem to swing about, bow, join hands, and change partners.

I suppose there will always be some people who will carpool regardless of what others do. They want to save money, or they enjoy the company and conversation, or their employer makes it a condition of employment. A few foolhardy pedestrians will venture into traffic by themselves, but most of us will find our opportunity to cross only when there seem to be enough others to make the crossing safe and successful. What is the point of forming a line of two or three passengers if others rush the airline gate? Twenty people can start a "wave" at Dodger Stadium but they cannot sustain it without the cooperation of thousands more. If our expectations that others will do their part are disappointed, we lose interest in coordination. We go our own way because the individual cost of forbearance or cooperation may seem too great in the absence of a known or predictable benefit. When social practices do not take hold, however, as with carpooling, we should not assume that everyone prefers to drive alone in the rush-hour creep.

"It could be said that conventions are 'discrete' if they don't require a 'critical mass' of people to make them work. They are practices with obvious benefits of coordination for those who cooperate regardless of how many others do likewise. This is the case of the 'designated driver' convention."

It could be said that conventions are "discrete" if they don't require a "critical mass" of people to make them work. They are practices with obvious benefits of coordination for those who cooperate regardless of how many others do likewise. This is the case of the "designated driver" convention promoted by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and publicized, not only by that national organization, but by liquor companies, taverns, and law enforcement agencies. If two of us plan to drink and drive, it is in everyone's interest that a third companion does not drink and keeps the car keys. Of course, if other groups in our driving area observe this convention, our ride home will be even safer.

Discrete conventions with regard to child care are emerging in the workplace. They include "flex-time," permitting employees to alter their work schedules; two professionals working part-time and sharing one job at a firm; and day care centers on site. Such practices help working mothers and fathers to accommodate their schedules to their children's needs.

What is often missing is the coordination needed to put adults with children. Nearly 10 percent of American chil-

dren don't even have one parent in the households where they live. Are there enough adults around for the children who don't have adults around enough? A friend of mine writes that "contract" families are being tried in Dallas. "They have put together a model that invents families. For instance, an older person is housed in the same apartment with a younger single parent and infant child. Contractually, the older person agrees to care for the child on specified occasions. In return, the parent has responsibility for cooking needs and doing light housekeeping." We have a number of existing conventions that are analogous — apprenticeships, chaperones, adoption, godparents, the buddy system. In each case, an adult teaches, trains, looks after, or looks out for a child. There are also Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Boys Club, Girls Club, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Head Start, play groups, foster and group homes.

Are there enough adults around for the elderly who don't have their own children around enough? Is it possible to coordinate enough adults to look out for someone else's parents if those same adults cannot look out for their own: make home visits; provide transportation to malls, parks, doctors' offices, social centers; do the shopping; record or videotape an oral history of an older person's remembrances; help draft living wills; etc? Such acts are significant whether or not countless others do the same. But like the discrete convention of the designated driver, we would be much better off if everyone else could practice the same behavior. As we sow . . . children grow up and we grow old.

"Are there enough adults around for the elderly who don't have their own children around enough? Is it possible to coordinate enough adults to look out for someone else's parents if those same adults cannot look out for their own?"

LEARNING FROM EVERYDAY CONVENTIONS

What do we learn from the experience of everyday conventions? First, we learn that there is an interest in coordination among strangers because of our interdependence. Second, we learn that coordination requires regularities of behavior among strangers that amount to a rudimentary form of social organization. And third, we learn that such cooperation among strangers can produce satisfactory outcomes for problems that no one alone can solve.

Interdependence is a situation, not a choice. As strangers we join a line, not because we like lines or because we like those

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who stand in line with us, but because the line produces a satisfactory outcome for what would otherwise be a time-consuming and contentious situation caused by too many of us in one place at one time. We create a problem of congestion for each other and we need each other to solve it. Interdependence is implicit in both the problem and the solution. I did not cause the congestion, although I contributed to it along with everyone else, and; if each of us accepts the convention of the line, we produce a satisfactory outcome.

Unlike the congestion at the bank, we confront many coordination problems on a daily basis that are not of our own making. Consider the example of pedestrians finding it difficult to cross a busy intersection. As pedestrians, your behavior and mine did not cause the problem but we still need each other to solve it. We have to coordinate our behavior by entering the intersection in sufficient numbers to make drivers halt for our crossing. What we learn from the experience of everyday conventions is that we are often part of the problem and always part of the answer.

Without social organization, there is no way that strangers can coordinate their behavior. The kind of social organization associated with everyday conventions requires communication among strangers or a regularity of behavior that makes communication unnecessary. Except for discrete conventions, social organization also requires *enough* strangers, acting in concert, to produce a satisfactory outcome. Such communication may be no more than a temporary organization when we all step off the curb together to stop oncoming traffic or the long-standing convention, literally, that organizes a line at the bank or airline gate.

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Finally, the experience of everyday conventions teaches us that cooperation can work among strangers. Few of us are altruistic. We more likely think of ourselves as law-abiding, or good sports, or team players. We are willing to go along to get along on the condition that enough others act the same way. There may be little calculation. I do my part. If others don't, I'll stop doing mine. That is why conventions work so well. We don't think through what we should do. There is an established regularity of behavior that we recall works more often than not. We rarely stop to calculate whether conform-

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ing to an everyday convention serves our interests — it becomes second nature.

Everyday conventions establish a working trust among strangers. Experience has taught us that predictable behavior, rather than unpredictable behavior, is in everyone's favor. Even when the actors change, the convention does not. This is no small achievement in a patchwork society where we have few grounds for mutual trust or opportunities for collective action.

Conventions give a sense of commonality to a culture steeped in individualism. "Liberty" is our watchword and it sends us off in all directions. Our education makes individual development the prize by passing tests and getting certification, instead of learning how to solve problems together. Our social mobility lets us move up, move out, move on. We move out of old neighborhoods and head for the suburbs; relocate businesses where the "climate" is better; put the children in private schools; or look for places where we can start over.

And "we have our rights." We measure public life more in relation to government, than in relation to each other. We become clients, litigants, victims, and petitioners. We look for remedies that lie outside of the immediate community where we live. "Rights," "entitlements," and "mandates" become trump cards we use to make demands on each other. In doing so, we acknowledge our interdependence but only see conflict. None of this is likely to change anytime soon. We live, however, with a contradiction. The more you and I do as we like, the less you and I get what we want. "Individual empowerment" still leaves each of us powerless to solve social problems.

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We think of government, at whatever level, as being organized on our behalf to deal with most of the social problems that afflict us. But we also have serious reservations about its responsiveness or its "solutions." We either do not want to pay for them or don't trust the capacity of government to actually improve the situation. In the last 20 years, we lost a war, we were victimized by a foreign oil cartel because of our failure to develop adequate energy reserves or alternatives, we saw our political checks-and-balances system

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threatened by Watergate and Iran-Contra, and we became a debtor nation.

As for market solutions, most of the problems on the public agenda are tasks which private enterprise has shunned. As a businessman once told me, "Business does what is doable, government gets all the rest." The business world believes in "solutions," but Daniel Boorstin, the American historian, points out that democratic government is a "process" not a "product." (Boorstin 1971, p. 121) We discover that governing and problem solving are not necessarily the same thing.

We would like to think that someone is in charge, but no one is. Harry Truman observed that the President could say "do this, do that," but nothing would happen. When I was in government, I recall going to what I considered the center of things and finding either no one there or else a room full of people, each with a different agenda. Analysts and politicians prefer more rational or flattering explanations of how things get done. This, in part, accounts for our profound disappointment with government performance. We are led to believe that projections, predictions, and proposed "solutions" are more than just guesswork. It has been my experience that the improvisation of politics and policy resembles the way a conventional speed gets established on a stretch of highway.

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When government confronts a problem, analysis, interaction, and consequence all mix in unpredictable combinations. Let me use an example. A former student of mine, now with the New York City Department of Environmental Conservation, writes me telling of their quandary. Because of the need to curb water consumption, the city has decided to meter homes and apartment buildings. (The old water-billing system averaged water use citywide so that large users were subsidized by small users.) But there is no "fair" scheme for allocating water use within multifamily buildings where 70 percent of city residents live. Metering individual apartments is "prohibitively expensive and almost impossible logistically." Without a way to meter each apartment, a building will pay for its total use. But who will pay? If a building has a lot of large or doubled-up families, or if the tenants are home all day using water, some people will pay a disproportionate amount for others' use. My friend warns that if the landlord cannot pass on the cost,

building abandonment is possible. So even with government intervention, the water conservation depends on millions of New Yorkers voluntarily changing their daily behavior. Since receiving his letter, I have seen full-page ads, run by his department, encouraging New Yorkers to turn off the tap when brushing their teeth, to use washers/dishwashers only with full loads, and to limit showers to three minutes.

With or without government intervention, social problems are hard to solve, and we are rarely organized to deliberate and act. When we do organize, it is often against government — the NIMBY phenomenon, "Not in My Backyard." We organize to resist the "solutions" of government — siting a homeless shelter too close to home, or it may be a drug-rehabilitation center, or a trash-burning incinerator. What may be good for others is seen as bad for us. Their solutions become our problems. To oppose such projects is easier than organizing to create our own solutions. We feel the loss of something we already have more acutely than gains that we have not yet experienced. (Hardin 1982, pp. 63-64) In the case of NIMBY, we organize to resist other people's solutions, not to solve the problem.

What everyday conventions teach us is that we can only solve social problems with the cooperation of others. Some Americans are already seeking to establish and reestablish conventions of behavior, which neither government nor markets can do for them. Their private actions, when coordinated, have public consequence on terms congenial to their everyday lives. New conventions of behavior are a form of collective action, other than government, that accommodates our modern circumstance of being "more entangled" with each other, but "less attached." (Sandel 1988, p. 120)

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ESTABLISHING NEW CONVENTIONS

Montaigne wrote, "Whatever position you set men in, they pile up and arrange themselves by moving and crowding together, just as ill-matched objects put in a bag without order find of themselves a way to unite and fall into place together, often better than they could have been arranged by art." (Montaigne trans. Hazlitt 1949, pp. 452-53) There is a mystery that remains about conventions. I have tried to

dissect them to know them better, but they still elude facile generalizations. We often do not know their origin and can only guess at what alternatives were available. We don't know who prescribed them or whether they arose spontaneously in response to an incident now long forgotten, or perhaps never known.

Like a path whose direction we trust, but whose origin we know little or nothing about, a convention often becomes firmly established when no one can remember how it started. Think of hard-won changes in an organization — increasing the productivity level, or promoting more minority members to executive positions, or consulting across departments before any major decision is made. At one time these practices were unheard of or unattainable, but they were eventually secured after some disruption and turmoil in the organization. For a time, the practices were fragile and not expected to survive. There was confusion and resistance. As time went on, however, older employees accepted them or retired, and new employees assumed such practices were routine and expected. The status quo shifted and, over time, fewer recalled or even knew how tenuous such practices once were. When someone now says — "that's just the way we do things around here" — you can be sure that a convention is secure. The path is now well worn and enough others in the organization have made it so. Such practices might be changed again for good reason, but there will be a large task of changing how people do things. It may take time to clear a new path and get others to follow it.

Sometimes, a journey from point A to point B is only seen as purposeful in retrospect — a little like settling on a restaurant even though no one had a particular place in mind. But the spontaneous ordering of behavior is as likely to succeed, assuming the circumstances persist that warranted its origination, as the ordering created by explicit agreement or some central authority.

We more or less unconsciously accept established conventions without the inquiry that I am undertaking here. If, however, we are to establish new conventions, their origination and how they might be secured deserve attention. What would it take to establish a new convention? Although I do not discount the possibility of spontaneous social organization, my discussion here will assume a more deliberate

course of action, whether or not anyone knows, at the outset, that it will lead to the establishment of a new convention. It is a discussion, more philosophical than empirical, about how a convention might be established and the rationale for how that could happen. We simply don't know much about the origins of conventions. (Ullmann-Margalit 1977, p. 1)

Many of us would like to improve a situation, but we usually conclude that our individual effort would be miniscule and futile. How long will I go to the nature preserve and pick up the litter, if I see no one else doing it and my solitary effort makes no visible impact? I realize that unless I coordinate my behavior with others, I cannot possibly make up for our collective neglect. I just don't see enough others doing something about the problem to ensure that my contribution is worth making. Pursuing my self-interest certainly does not improve a situation but neither does my public-spiritedness. To establish a new convention requires large-scale cooperation among strangers.

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The origin of a new convention might be traced to the familiar places where we can find each other — coffee shops, health clubs, malls, bars, plazas, school auditoriums, church basements, community college classrooms, etc. In those places, we tell our stories — where we saw the litter or discovered birds strangled by plastic six-pack rings, where perfectly good food is discarded behind a restaurant, where drugs are sold, where latchkey kids hang out, or where the elderly have difficulty crossing the street. From such stories, we begin to name problems that are within our range. Obviously many problems requiring a coordinated response are not within our everyday range — acid rain, the national deficit, drug cartels, or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. After naming a problem, we may disassemble it and look for manageable parts. (Lindblom 1990, p. 37)

Out of such conversations may come questions that require more deliberation — a larger conversation in the community. "Community" is often invoked when there is scant evidence that it exists. I assume, however, that deliberation is possible, even among strangers, when people share common problems and a desire to do something about them. A forum gives us a way of evaluating each other's resolve.

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Our questions may include:

1. Do we have unsolved coordination problems within our immediate range? What everyday problems do we create for each other? What everyday problems require each other's cooperation?

2. What new regularities of behavior would help solve our coordination problems? What if everyone . . . ? Are there new regularities of behavior that are already struggling to be accepted community-wide that deserve our attention?

3. Are there existing conventions that might work in a new context (an auction, lending library, lost and found, etc.)? What coordination problems were such conventions created for? Were such problems analogous to our coordination problems? What alternative solutions were available?

4. If we can agree on a new regularity of behavior, is it simple and unambiguous? Is it congenial to our everyday lives? Is there a precept of behavior that will sustain it? Will some people bear an unequal burden? Will some people find it difficult to participate? Are they here to have their say and be heard? Will the new regularity of behavior make sense in one place but not another, at one time but not another? Are there enough of us to establish a new convention?

5. What alternative solutions do we have available? (For some people, government intervention is an attractive shortcut. If there is reason enough to organize around an unsolved coordination problem, isn't that reason enough for government to intervene? Such a question prompts other questions.)

6. Can government solve the coordination problem for us? Are there such conflicts among us that we should let government settle the matter? If government does intervene, what will it cost and how will it be paid for? If a new law is needed, will there be general compliance? Will we be able to get the law changed or scrapped once it is in place?

At some point, government intervention may be desirable to secure a new convention, if it is not too costly or intrusive. The "tipping" influence of legal measures, such as taxes, fees, regulations or fines, may be used to reassure the majority that no one will take advantage of their voluntary cooperation. But to coerce the majority is usually beyond the will or capacity of democratic government.

There is no way of knowing how all our questions will be resolved or even if they can be. Assuming, however, that an interest in coordination persists, a core group will probably take the lead. Those in a core group may have worked together before on a cleanup, crime watch, food pantry, carpool, recycling center, day care site, or elderly outing in the community. They may want to sustain relationships, preserve reputations, reciprocate past favors. They may be located in various neighborhoods, workplaces, churches, and local associations — a beginning network to recruit others. Petitions that enroll, or "covenants" that commit, are conventions, too. A core group's relation to the unsolved coordination problem will not be tentative or conditioned by what others do. They will simply believe that someone has to be the first off the curb to mobilize others to follow and create the safety in numbers to get to the other side. Leaders get where they are going with the help of others.

"The conditional nature of cooperation paradoxically is a strength, not a weakness, when enlisting others' help. After all, if everyone else is going to do something, why do they need me?"

Although leaders will not be conditional cooperators themselves, they may recognize that conditional cooperation is ground enough for establishing a convention. The conditional nature of cooperation paradoxically is a strength, not a weakness, when enlisting others' help. After all, if everyone else is going to do something, why do they need me? But if my cooperation is important for enlisting or maintaining others' cooperation, then I become important — not just an accessory. Any convention in the making, however, is fragile. There are so many alternatives available to each of us other than cooperation. And there is probably no norm yet developed to support a new regularity of behavior.

If a new convention of behavior is to be established, there have to be enough others to make it work and enough others may be hard to find unless the prospect of success is within reach. If your car is stuck in a snowbank, you have to persuade those of us who are passersby that our cooperation in rocking or pushing the car is absolutely necessary. You

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might even exaggerate the prospects of success. This would not be deliberate deception, but only a kind of unexamined optimism that draws others into the organized effort. If you are convinced that your car is hopelessly stuck, it does little good to recruit the help of passersby. We won't succeed. If, however, you really don't know how many it will take, but you are sure that enough of us can manage to free the car from the snowbank, then it is to your advantage, and probably to those who stop to help, that we assume enough of us can make the difference. In another context, William James said, " . . . Faith in a fact can help create the fact." (James 1956, p. 25) What leaders do is to get the car rocking with the gift of optimism.

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The mistake of those who find it hard to conceive of cooperation among strangers is that they think we somehow know or calculate the odds of success or failure. On the contrary, we often get involved because we don't. Dennis Chong offers a marvelous example of "how a widespread expectation that an upcoming rally will attract a large number of supporters can amount to a self-fulfilling prophesy. An individual will attend because he wants to be a part of a memorable and successful historical event; but it is actually his participation and the participation of hundreds or thousands of other like-minded individuals which ensure that the rally is both successful and memorable." (Chong 1991, p. 176)

Once we have become part of an undertaking, that experience may produce its own staying power. "Striving" becomes "the compensation for uncertainty." (Hirschman 1982, p. 89) Any group of strangers who wants to solve a coordination problem will probably pay more attention to finding allies than worrying about those who don't join them. When your car is stuck in the snowbank, we who stop to assist you look for more help to make our task easier and less time-consuming. But few of us, having offered assistance, will walk away leaving you to fend for yourself because some passersby fail to stop and lend a hand. Your expectations of us, as well as our own expectations developed on the scene, keep us there. If there is such a thing as an "effort convention" it comes into play as we go through the experience together — each of us measuring our individual contribution against what others already involved are doing. It doesn't matter what specific outcome we strive for;

cooperation, seen as a convention, has its own precept: do your fair share.

But when we aren't together in the same snowbank, we need some way of communicating with each other for mutual support. We know that we are more likely to cooperate if we can maintain communication. Obviously there is a wide array of messages that people send and receive in their everyday contacts. But how do large numbers of people keep in touch? The possibilities depend on sharing information quickly and inexpensively by cable, computer, videotape, fax, satellite, etc., to find out "how we're doing." New communication technologies have enormous potential for encouraging large-scale cooperation among strangers. Such communication can update the general status of an undertaking and make visible each person's participation through stories, pictures, lists, awards, ceremonies, etc. Few of us wish to remain anonymous. Our need to see and be seen recalls Garrison Keillor's delightful story about Flag Day in Lake Wobegone where townspeople paraded as a "living flag" and each one participating wanted to step out of the line of march to see what had been created. (Keillor 1986, pp. 123-124)

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If progress is reported frequently, it encourages us that success is possible and that it depends on each person's continued cooperation. The largest obstacle in establishing a new convention is getting enough others to cooperate so that a threshold is reached where the cost of cooperation is exceeded by the collective benefit secured — whether that means less pollution, congestion, waste, crime, hunger, neglect, or isolation. Once enough others regulate their behavior and, therefore, produce such beneficial outcomes, cooperation becomes less speculative. The "payoff" increases as more people cooperate. (Taylor 1987, p. 108) Nothing succeeds like success, and it can create enough other cooperating individuals to make the convention self-sustaining. There is an exhilaration that comes from being part of an undertaking that accomplishes, more or less, what it sets out to do. This is especially true among strangers when there are no other ties but those that develop, at least temporarily, because of their cooperation, as in military campaigns, political insurgencies, walk-a-thons, even the successful performance of the "wave" at Dodger Stadium.

Finally, there are the problems of success. When we seek to improve a situation, there is always the possibility that we won't — not because of a failure to get others' cooperation, but because that cooperation leads to problems that we did not foresee. If we organize carpools in an attempt to relieve traffic congestion, others, who stopped driving and took mass transit because of such congestion, may resume driving and thus bring back the congestion that carpooling temporarily relieved. If there is a successful water-conservation campaign, public authorities may be tempted to divert water to other areas which are more profligate, thus penalizing us for our thrift. If too many of us report suspicious activity to local police, we may overload the switchboard and prevent those requiring emergency help from getting through. There is no answer for fixing coordination problems once and for all. They have to be dealt with as they arise and, as they are resolved, new and unforeseen problems will probably intrude. Problems are hard to solve.

"When some people, although not enough of them, cooperate in trying to improve a situation, there is no telling what their discrete conventions will lead to."

Even the failure to establish a new convention may produce unanticipated success stories. When some people, although not enough of them, cooperate in trying to improve a situation, there is no telling what their discrete conventions will lead to. It is difficult to trace their influence except to know that discrete conventions will conserve some resources, protect some space, help some children and elderly, feed some hungry, avoid some waste, stop some crime, save some lives. They may not have created a well-worn path that everyone will follow, but, one of these days, enough of us may discover their footprints and find they lead us to where we want to go.

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